

A QUESTION OF SINCERITY

IT surprises you, I see, to find me a church member and teaching a class in the Sabbath school," the older man said with the quizzical smile that the younger man remembered from the days of his clerkship at Hastings & Brandt's. "Well, sometimes I'm surprised myself. Ten years ago I thought I had settled this religious question once for all, and settled it right.

"I never told you that I was brought up in a Christian home and had a praying mother. I didn't like to think about or talk about it at that time, for I used to have a twinge of conscience when I thought how grieved father and mother would be if they knew that I had cut loose from the beliefs that meant so much to them.

"My unbelief started with the people who didn't appear to me to be living up to their Christian professions. It wasn't the badness of these people that impressed me, but the lack of anything real in their lives. It looked to me like a game they were playing out because their fathers had played it. Finally I just dismissed the whole subject as an outworn tradition and believed that I was acting upon my sincere convictions.

"Here is where Ben Luther comes in. I hired him to do odd jobs round the store. He was a stranger to me, and, beyond his own statement that he was an orphan, with no near relatives, I knew nothing of him or his family. Later, a rumor drifted in from somewhere that Ben's father had been under arrest once for mishandling money, and I suppose that made me think of Ben when our cash drawer counted short.

"After that had happened two or three times, and a marked bill was missing, I went up to Ben's boarding place one afternoon and got permission of his landlady to search his room. I didn't intend to make a public example of the boy, and there was a bare chance I might find something that would satisfy my own mind.

"I did. It was a small, much-worn pocket Bible, lying open at a chapter marked by a turned-down leaf. The mark had been made years before, for the thin paper was cracking, and it came to me like a flash that it was his mother's Bible, that her fingers had marked the place.

"I don't know that I ever made a discovery that affected me as that one did. I went out of the room and made the landlady promise never to mention my visit. What I had seen would be worthless as evidence in any court, but I dismissed my suspicions on the strength of it, and later disclosures proved that I did right.

"Strangest of all, the incident forced me to question my own sincerity. Had I found an open book of history or fiction or poetry in Ben's room, I should have gone on with my search. Why was finding an open Bible different? Why was it different to me, who professed to have no special reverence for the Bible? Why should I judge the probable character of a stranger by the fact that he read, or did not read, a discredited book?

"That was the beginning. I decided that I wasn't really sincere in my skepticism, and I set out to make myself an honest man. I didn't believe it would carry me so far as this, but it has."

